

MERIDIAN'S DVD

When DVD movies finally launch in Europe this autumn, Meridian's 586.2 will do them justice

by KEN KESSLER

My gripes with Meridian — unavailability of product, over-optimistic release dates, indifference to home markets — can't apply to the firm's DVD player. Its non-appearance in Europe is due to industry strategies, not the firm's attitude. But having spent a week with the latest Meridian 586.2 DVD spinner (£2295), it would be remiss of me not to inform you, the great British public who put Meridian on the map in the first place, just what's what with the 586.2.

Sporting classic 500-Series styling, the 586.2 is black, glossy and uncluttered. If you didn't see the letters 'DVD' below the logo, you'd mistake this for a CD player. Hell, you could mistake a Toshiba, a Sony or Panasonic DVD player for a CD player because they all spin 5in discs and the manufacturers have opted for hardware which exploits DVD's intrinsic familiarity rather than its newness. An odd way to market a new format, but then the assholes who have kept DVD from us apparently know best.

Across the front Meridian replace the traditional 'skinny' front-loading tray for something more substantial. Also in this sub-section are straightforward transport controls identical to those found on a CD player: open, play, stop, pause, display, previous, next and a switch which takes the 586.2 out of standby or back into standby; the display button allows choice of title, chapter, track and time. Primary on/off is at the back, above the IEC mains input, along with connectors more associated with laserdisc rather than CD equipment.

In addition to conventional analogue audio and coaxial digital outputs, and an RS232 computer

socket and a brace of DIN-like sockets for inter-Meridian communications are three video output options. The first and — by videophile standards, most important — are the three phono sockets for 'component' video connection, academic in the Kessler household as our two-year-old Panasonic set lacks component video inputs. Next is composite, but I opted for S-Video (the third). The 586.2 I borrowed is a Zone One, NTSC player and as the only way I can get my set to play back NTSC signals is via the S-Video socketry, I didn't have much choice. Playback was through both the Meridian 861 and the Lexicon DC-1 surround controller/pre-amps, the inputs were set up for Dolby Digital.

As my only other hands-on experience with DVD was with a Toshiba player, it was convenient that Meridian used the top Toshiba mechanism and decoder PCB as the basis for the 586.2. But from there on it's a Meridian production — tray mechanism, D/A converter, video and audio circuitry.

Aside from communication with other Meridian components — switching on the 586.2, for example, activates an associated Meridian pre-amp or surround decoder-pre-amp — operational behaviour is conventional DVD. Once I had negotiated the novelty elements — on-screen information, viewing options — I used the 586.2 to access the Banderas bullet-fest *Desperado* in Dolby Digital, Delos' excellent *DVD Spectacular* demo disc, five 96kHz audio-only DVDs from Classic Records (which played back at 48kHz through the 861 — still better than

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Meridian
Audio Limited,
Stonehill,
Huntingdon,
camps
PE18 6ED.
Tel: 01480
434334

conventional CD) and the Beatles' *Help*, *A Hard Day's Night* and *Magical Mystery Tour*.

What the Meridian DVD player demonstrated, beyond a relative freedom from Stuartian operational quirks, were pictures which had me wondering if I'd ever buy another laserdisc. Yes, kids, the blacks were even blacker, the frame freezes rock solid. But a scene full of leaping flames looked like crude computer video from four years ago — vague, jerky and unconvincing. This, I hasten to add, is not Meridian's fault, but DVD's.

Far more revealing were comparisons of the Beatles' films. Never mind the prefatory assurances that these are taken from the familiar mid-1980s release. Suggestions that they derived from state-of-the-art re-releases for American cable TV seem similarly unfounded — this was no better than a CD-ROM, and not as crisp as the Criterion Laserdisc. That said, the musical delight to be had from the Classic Records offerings — even stepped down to 48kHz playback — is undeniable.

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So, after all that, am I envious of Yanks who can actually buy the Meridian? Yes and no. 'Yes', because I don't feel we should be deprived of a new format because some cigar-smoking Hollywood executives think we can't cope with it yet; let's wish fatal heart-attacks on these schmucks real soon. 'No' because I think DVD still has a long way to go before it warrants dumping your VCR or laserdisc player. +

